

P 070817Z OCT 87  
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2540  
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS  
AMEMBASSY CAIRO  
AMEMBASSY RABAT  
AMEMBASSY PARIS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 11327

E.O. 12356:

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SUBJECT: REACTION TO AND BACKGROUND ON TUNISIA'S NEW  
PRIME MINISTER AND PARTY LEADER

REF: TUNIS 11130

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

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ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI  
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12. LOCAL AND FOREIGN REACTION TO ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI'S APPOINTMENT AS PRIME MINISTER IS GENERALLY POSITIVE. AT HOME, HE IS RESPECTED AS A COMPETENT HARD-WORKER SOMEWHAT ALOOF FROM THE USUAL POLITICAL SQUABBLES. HIS MILITARY BACKGROUND AND TENURE AT THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR, HOWEVER, LEAD MANY TUNISIANS TO SUSPECT A HARDENING OF GOT'S POSITION VIS-A-VIS DISSENT, AN IMPRESSION THAT BEN ALI'S INITIAL STATEMENT AND RECENT EDITORIALS BASED ON THAT STATEMENT HAVE TAKEN PAINS TO DISPEL. THE FOREIGN MEDIA, INCLUDING SUCH CRITICS OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN TUNISIA AS "LE MONDE", HAVE SPOKEN FAVORABLY OF HIS APPOINTMENT. CHARACTERIZING BEN ALI AS A "STRONG MAN", LE MONDE OPINED THAT BEN ALI IS THE RIGHT MAN FOR THE JOB AT THIS TIME. GOT SEEMS PARTICULARLY GRATIFIED BY THIS ENDORSEMENT FROM THE FOREIGN MEDIA AND HAS GIVEN IT PROMINENT COVERAGE.

13. ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI WAS BORN AT HAMMAM SOUSSE, A SMALL TOWN NEAR PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S BIRTHPLACE OF MONASTIR, ON 3 SEPTEMBER 1936. HE STUDIED AT THE MILITARY ACADEMY OF SAINT-CYR AND THE ARTILLERY SCHOOL IN CHALONS SUR-MARNE IN FRANCE AND TOOK THE SENIOR FOREIGN OFFICERS INTELLIGENCE COURSE AT FORT HOLABIRD, MARYLAND, AND AN ARTILLERY COURSE AT FORT BLISS, TEXAS. HE BECAME DIRECTOR OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE IN 1958, A POSITION HE HELD FOR 16 YEARS UNDER FOUR DIFFERENT DEFENSE MINISTERS. IN 1974, BEN ALI WAS SENT AS MILITARY ATTACHE TO RABAT. ACCORDING TO JEUNE AFRIQUE, THIS APPOINTMENT RESULTED FROM PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S SUSPICIONS WHEN BEN ALI'S NAME APPEARED ON A LIST OF PROJECTED APPOINTMENTS RESULTING FROM THE STILL-BORN TUNISIAN/LIBYAN UNION AGREEMENT. KNOWN FOR HIS DISCIPLINE AND COMPETENCE, BEN ALI WAS CALLED BACK TO TUNIS TO RUN THE BUREAU OF NATIONAL SECURITY (SURETE NATIONALE) JUST BEFORE LABOR STRIFE CULMINATED IN GOT'S VIOLENT CRACKDOWN OF THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1978. IN 1980 HE REPORTEDLY RAN AFOUL OF MRS. WASSILA BOURGUIBA AND WAS SENT AWAY TO BECOME AMBASSADOR TO POLAND. IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE VIOLENT BREAD RIOTS OF 1984, BEN ALI WAS RECALLED TO THE DIRECTORSHIP OF NATIONAL SECURITY. ON 28 APRIL, HE WAS NAMED MINISTER OF INTERIOR AND IN MID-MAY WAS PROMOTED TO MINISTER OF STATE.

14. WHILE HIS PUBLIC APPEARANCE IS SOMEWHAT AUSTERE, BEN ALI IN PRIVATE DISPOSES OF CONSIDERABLE CHARM AND RADIATES CONFIDENCE. IN RECENT MONTHS, HE HAS INCREASINGLY BEEN CALLED UPON TO EXPLAIN GOT SECURITY POLICY IN PUBLIC MEETINGS AND WITH THE FOREIGN PRESS AND HANDLED THESE SITUATIONS WELL. HE HAS LITTLE EXPERIENCE IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND ECONOMICS, AND WILL HAVE TO RELY ON HIS MINISTERIAL COLLEAGUES IN THESE AREAS AT LEAST INITIALLY. HIS TENDENCY FOR MICRO-MANAGEMENT OF THE SECURITY SERVICE MUST ALSO

CHANGE AS INDICATED BY THE APPOINTMENT OF MOHAMED  
KARBOUL, A CAREER INTERIOR MINISTRY OFFICIAL, AS  
DIRECTOR GENERAL OF NATIONAL SECURITY OCTOBER 6.

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MAHJOUB BEN ALI  
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15. MAHJOUB BEN ALI, THE NEW DESTOURIAN SOCIALIST  
PARTY (PSD) CHIEF, IS THE MOST PROMINENT OF FIVE OR  
SIX HARDLINERS THAT PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA HAS CALLED  
BACK TO SERVICE IN THE RECENT MONTHS. REACTION TO  
MAHJOUB'S APPOINTMENT IS GENERALLY NEGATIVE. THE  
EDUCATED ELITE IN PARTICULAR HAVE A LOW OPINION OF  
HIM. THEY SNEER AT HIS LACK OF FORMAL EDUCATION AND  
DEEM HIM RIGID AND NARROW-MINDED.

16. MAHJOUB BEN ALI, 62, WAS BORN IN BIZERTE. IN  
1952 HE WAS PUT IN CHARGE OF ORGANIZING  
PRE-INDEPENDENCE RESISTANCE TO THE FRENCH IN THE  
NORTH AND BECAME A PRINCIPAL LEADER OF THE RESISTANCE  
MOVEMENT. MAHJOUB LED THE GUERILLA ATTACK ON A  
BUSLOAD OF FRENCH CIVILIANS IN 1952 THAT BOURGUIBA  
CREDITS WITH SHAKING FRANCE OUT OF ITS COMPLACENCY  
ABOUT TUNISIA. HE LED THE NATIONAL GUARD FROM 1956  
UNTIL 1967 WHEN HE WAS DISMISSED FOR FAILING TO  
CONTROL ANTI-AMERICAN DEMONSTRATIONS IN THE WAKE OF  
THE 6 DAY WAR. HE THEN OCCUPIED A NUMBER OF LESSER  
POSITIONS WHERE HE EARNED A REPUTATION FOR  
HEAVY-HANDEDNESS. IN THE WAKE OF THE BOMBINGS AT THE  
TOURIST HOTELS LAST AUGUST, HE WAS APPOINTED DEPUTY  
DIRECTOR OF THE PSD IN CHARGE OF THE VIGILANCE  
COMMITTEES.

PELLETREAU